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Representing the Duchy

Francis Acland and Cornish Politics, 1910–1922

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Introduction

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a time of rapid change in British politics. Before the First World War the Liberals were the dominant force at Westminster, following their historic landslide victory in 1906 over the Conservatives and their Liberal Unionist allies. By 1924, however, a new order had been created, with Labour and the Conservatives competing for a now declining Liberal vote in order to become the principal party of government. Less obvious were the changes taking place in ‘Celtic’ Britain. By the outbreak of the First World War the stimulus of the ‘Irish question’ had led to a renewed interest in Scottish and Welsh concerns over issues like devolution and Anglican disestablishment. Growing disenchantment with Westminster was to culminate in the formation of Plaid Cymru and the National Party of Scotland in the 1920s. The implications for the future were significant since nationalist movements operating outside of the London-based parties had finally been established during a crucial period of realignment for Britain as a whole.

There has been a tendency in Cornish Studies to emphasise the contrasting theme of continuity west of the Tamar. In the first place, economic and social stagnation enabled the Cornish Liberals to survive the early 1920s, a period which Chris Cook termed the Age of Alignment, leaving the old-style radicals firmly secure as the principal alternative to the Conservatives with Labour unable to win even a single seat until 1945.¹ This produced a distinctive pattern of party politics in Cornwall that essentially endures to

the present day. One might add that in terms of nationalist politics it was not until the launch of Mebyon Kernow (Sons of Cornwall) in 1951 that a Cornish political movement even existed. Scholars have focused on the non-political stance of early Revivalists like Henry Jenner and the continuing appeal of antiquarianism for organisations like Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak (Celtic Cornish Society) in 1901 and the Old Cornwall movement.² Yet by the late 1990s there were indications that both interpretations were starting to be modified in the light of new research. In the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Cornwall was briefly at the forefront in the rise of Labour, with the party's share of the vote in 1918 comparing favourably with other regions destined to become Labour strongholds.³ Similarly, there has been some consideration of the political dimension to Cornish identity ranging from Jenner's right-wing sympathies to the impact of the Celtic Revival on party politics.⁴ Nonetheless, it is surprising that there has been no major study of this critical period in Cornish political history. In particular there is a clear need for an approach that can usefully draw together both avenues of inquiry by placing Cornwall within a wider British context.

This article seeks to initiate further debate through a case study of the early political career of Francis Acland. In December 1910 he was selected to fight the radical stronghold of Camborne and his subsequent twelve years as a Cornish MP coincide with the process of transition taking place in British politics, since by 1922 Labour had already emerged as the national opposition to the Conservatives. After outlining Acland's neglected achievements at Westminster, the article moves to a thematic consideration with his personal experiences analysed in relation to Labour's challenge to Liberalism in a regional framework. His strategy for dealing with this situation, notably through the advocacy of a more meaningful post-war relationship between the Liberal and Labour parties, offers further insight into the history of progressive politics at this time. Biographical studies of individual politicians can also highlight the political dynamics of the provinces. In the case of Acland, the article will focus on the challenge of the Labour movement, the early rise of anti-metropolitanism, and his personal perspectives on Cornwall and the Cornish.

The forgotten Liberal: locating Acland in relation to British and Cornish politics

An article based on a study of Francis Acland (1874–1939) might seem surprising given his virtual invisibility in historical studies of the twentieth century. Although a junior government minister at the War Office and the Foreign Office during the years leading up to the First World War, there

are few references to his activities at these key government departments. In 1998 he was not even included in the standard *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*. Although this volume covered the biographies of over 200 individuals associated with British Liberalism, since Acland had not been a party leader, served as a cabinet minister or been recognised as a leading intellectual thinker, he simply did not meet the relevant criteria. In contrast there was a biographical note dedicated to Sir Richard Acland, his more famous son, who had resigned from the party in 1942 after a brief career as MP for the Devon seat of Barnstaple to establish the Common Wealth movement.⁵ There has been a similar lack of interest in regard to his place in Cornwall's political history. Philip Payton rightly notes that the 'towering figure of Cornish Liberalism in this period was Isaac Foot'.⁶ Indeed, the ability of Foot to personify the regional interests of Cornwall established a model that was to be embraced later in the century by popular and charismatic politicians from Harold Hayman for Labour to David Penhaligon for the Liberals. Significantly, all three politicians are still fondly remembered in oral history recordings relating to Cornwall. By contrast, Acland found it difficult to develop a similar appeal that could enable his parliamentary career to pass into cultural memory.⁷ Even at the time there were individuals who dismissed him as merely 'an academic politician' from the aristocratic elite who could not truly understand the daily struggle of his constituents.⁸

But the evidence suggests that Acland's contribution deserves greater recognition. He was the heir to a baronetcy and the extensive Killerton estates across the South West of Britain, including 5,000 acres in Cornwall alone.⁹ The Aclands were accustomed to playing a prominent role in provincial affairs, with Francis boasting in his election address in December 1910 that in 'each of the last three centuries members of my family have had the honour of representing Cornish seats in the House of Commons. It will be my constant endeavour that in this century also I may be found no less worthy than they of the trust and friendship of Cornishmen'.¹⁰ During the final years of Herbert Asquith's government he seemed destined to 'go far in the counsels of the nation'.¹¹ After serving at the Foreign Office he was appointed as Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 1915 and became a member of the Privy Council a year later. Acland also played a key role in the pre-war campaign for women's suffrage, with Jo Vellacott portraying him as the most sympathetic member of Asquith's government.¹² Following the disastrous performance of the Liberals in 1918, Acland briefly emerged as a potential leader of the parliamentary party and a leading advocate of a rejuvenated Liberal-Labour alliance. In the mid-1920s his defection to the David Lloyd George camp resulted in a new role in the party's ongoing policy review. He became a key member of the former wartime leader's inner council alongside more famous individuals like John Maynard Keynes

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who was responsible for producing the party's radical programme to reduce unemployment entitled *Britain's Industrial Future*, the so-called *Yellow Book*, in 1928. Acland's reputation as a progressive landowner meant that in his case he became the leading figure associated with the party's parallel land reform programme, the *Green Book*.¹³ But his subsequent reputation was undermined by his failure to return to the House of Commons – for a lengthy period of eight years – following his defeat in 1924 at Tiverton. When Acland finally managed to win a seat following his narrow victory at the North Cornwall by-election in 1932, the *Liberal Women's New* was lavish in its praise for his parliamentary abilities:

From every aspect – character, intelligence, experience, tradition – Sir Francis is eminently a parliamentarian; his place should always be among those who help to govern, but owing to the workings of our electoral system and the party's ill luck at [elections] Westminster has missed his front-bench mind for many years.¹⁴

However, Acland had returned to parliament at a time when the Liberals were once more moving into the political wilderness. In the previous year the other Liberal MPs for Cornwall had been able to strengthen their political reputations by receiving ministerial posts in the National government. Both Walter Runciman at St Ives and Sir Donald Maclean in North Cornwall became members of the cabinet, while Isaac Foot was appointed as the Minister for Mines. In 1933, however, the independent Liberals withdrew their support from the government, and Acland remained out of office for the remaining period up until his death in 1939. Paradoxically, while Acland's absence from parliament came at a critical time in regard to his own political career, it should be acknowledged that he represented constituencies in Cornwall for a longer period than any other Liberal in the twentieth century. His record of nineteen years as MP for Camborne and North Cornwall compares favourably to more well-known individuals like Tomas Agar Robartes (1906, 1908–15), Isaac Foot (1922–24, 1929–35), John Pardoe (1966–79), Paul Tyler (1974, 1992–2005) and David Penhaligon (1974–86).¹⁵ Moreover, his parliamentary victories assisted the survival of Cornish Liberalism at critical times in the party's history. In both 1918 and 1935 he was the only Liberal to be returned for Cornwall and without his success, albeit by narrow majorities, the regional party might well have lost all credibility. A Labour victory in the earlier election could easily have been the catalyst that the socialists required in order to sustain their initial breakthrough. Similarly, success at North Cornwall in the 1930s helped to sustain Liberal traditions during the difficult middle decades of the century when the party appeared to be in a state of permanent decline.

Acland also provides an interesting example of a politician trying to define his position in connection to the conflicting worlds of high and low politics. In retrospect, he was one of the last rising stars in the Liberal Party who could still aspire to high office. The *Cornish Post* described him in 1917 as ‘an able and conscious specimen of the cultured and trained’ class of parliamentary officials and administrators that had traditionally dominated British politics.¹⁶ By the early 1930s, however, a new generation of Liberals were calling on the party to adjust to the fact that it was no longer able to meet its traditional goal of forming the next government.¹⁷ This was particularly the case in Cornwall where the party was to reposition itself after the Second World War as the anti-metropolitan alternative to the other parties. By studying a particular individual we can obtain further insight into the early stages of political change. The next section will analyse the impact of political change in Cornwall through reference to Acland’s own experiences.

Cornwall in transition?

Historians have been divided for many years in their search for a convincing explanation for the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberals. The view that the social foundations of Liberalism were being undermined by the emergence of Labour even before 1914 has proved very popular. Advocates of this approach, such as Keith Laybourn and Michael Childs, argue that the demise of the old order was only to be expected given the rise of class politics, particularly amongst the younger generation.¹⁸ But other historians have challenged this interpretation. Trevor Wilson claimed that it was the political and social consequences of the First World War that were really responsible, and Duncan Tanner subsequently developed this perspective when he stressed the significance of the wartime collapse of the Progressive Alliance between Labour and the Liberals.¹⁹

The complex nature of realignment has been essential in maintaining a sense of debate over the reasons for Labour’s breakthrough. Yet by the late 1990s scholars were starting to claim that this was also the very reason why the discussion should move to a balanced consideration of the subject. A good example was Andrew Torpe, who concluded that rival interpretations of the potential of the pre-war Labour Party were often too simplistic considering that there was no ‘clear pattern to the movement of events’.²⁰ Similarly, David Dutton argues the case for a ‘multi-dimensional’ approach based on a careful and sensitive consideration of the subject that covers both high and low politics. As he puts it, ‘whatever the precise truth, it seems improbable that any monocausal explanation will suffice’. Despite the sense of inevitability that was associated with Labour’s breakthrough, there is a

need to ‘accord more importance to the clashes of personality, the accidents of history and ... the individuality of the voter’.²¹ Such a view highlights the need to explore realignment from a multiple voices perspective by analysing the careers of individual politicians, recognising the existence of regional variations and exploring counterfactual possibilities.

All three avenues of inquiry can be applied to a case study of Acland’s early years in Cornwall. In the first place, his personal story of realignment needs to be located within the micro political environment of Camborne politics. Local studies of the rise of Labour tend to concentrate on those industrial and urban areas of Britain where the party was able to make an early and sustained breakthrough.²² Although Camborne was essentially an industrial constituency, there was little evidence of a direct parliamentary threat from Labour before the war. Working-class voters in the area still identified with Liberalism rather than Labour and in 1906 a Social Democratic Federation candidate had polled a derisory 1.5 per cent of the vote. Election issues in December 1910 simply echoed the debates of the previous century. Despite references to social reform in Acland’s election address, his supporters concentrated on religious concerns like temperance and Welsh disestablishment.²³ The issue of Irish Home Rule was particularly controversial because of the anti-Catholic sentiments associated with Cornish Methodism. Following the Liberal split of 1886 it was the breakaway Liberal Unionists that emerged as the dominant political force in Cornwall and they had survived as the largest political force until 1900. In December 1910 the Unionist candidate for Camborne attempted to shift the focus of the campaign away from House of Lords reform to Irish Home Rule. He argued that ‘it would be an everlasting disgrace to the Nonconformists here if they put in a man who voted in favour of ... putting the Nonconformists in the North of Ireland under the heels of a majority ruled by the Catholic priests’.²⁴ Acland was forced to recognise that many voters had been ‘thoroughly worked up by religious bigotry against Home Rule’ for Ireland.²⁵ Nonetheless, the critical factor was that at the local level the Liberal versus Unionist cleavage was still firmly established.

By 1918 there had been a dramatic change in the nature of party politics in Camborne. Labour was able to mount a credible challenge to Acland with George Nicholls, the party’s candidate, coming remarkably close to success with 48 per cent of the vote in a straight fight. Acland admitted to Asquith that ‘my return was rather a fluke for though I beat a good Labour man in a straight fight, I should not have won if the Tory candidate, ... had been put forward’.²⁶ The regional weakness of Labour before the war makes its early breakthrough appear even more surprising. One possibility is that the tensions generated as a result of the 1913 China Clay strike in mid-Cornwall had a radicalising effect on the Labour movement throughout the region.

Te eventual defeat of the strikers following their bitter campaign for union recognition and a minimum wage of 25 shillings a week is still remembered today. But a recent study by Ronald Perry and Charles Turlow casts doubt on the long-term importance of the strike. In their view the reality of the conflict was that the clay strikers were isolated from the wider community with 'half the workforce ... reluctant to join in'. More significant for the local Labour movement after the First World War was the impact of wider trends in British industrial relations. Perry and Turlow conclude that it was only to be expected that Cornwall would be influenced by a rapid expansion in trade union membership throughout the United Kingdom that 'shifted the balance to workers' at the expense of the employers. 'Even without the 1913 strike, and the powerful intervention of the Workers' Union, labour strength in the clay industry would probably have grown'.²⁷

This interpretation underestimates the scale of the Labour advance in Cornwall. It was mentioned earlier that in regard to party politics the region was actually leading, not copying, the rise of the British Labour movement by the end of the First World War. Underlying these developments on the electoral front was a growing confidence on the part of the trade unions in industrial areas like the Clay Country and the mining districts further west.²⁸ Whatever the actual realities of the dispute, it perhaps took on added significance because of the absence of a trade union tradition in Cornwall. With the decline of the mining industry the Clay Country was 'left as the isolated rump of extractive production in an otherwise de-industrialising economy'.²⁹ In these circumstances the 1913 strike provided a rare symbolic event that could define and articulate the values of the Cornish Labour movement. Although no Labour candidate actually stood in 1918, partly because the abolition of the old St Austell division meant that the Clay Country became part of the much larger seat of Penryn & Falmouth, it became the only major area in Cornwall in which the party made steady progress throughout the inter-war period. Although further research is required in order to conclude if there was a specific relationship between the strike and these subsequent developments, letters written to Acland in 1913 indicate that the strike did have a profound impact on the political culture of the time. J. F. Williams, a solicitor from Gorran Haven, remarked on 2 September that police tactics were making the strikers feel 'outcasts, with all society fighting against them':

I went round most of the clay district this afternoon in a motor. There were policemen everywhere. Te whole place had a Russian appearance. Groups of men were on the peaks of the St Austell Alps like the chamois in Cook's pictures of Switzerland. Te district is quiet – terrorised into quiet. But the whole countryside is full of rumours;

this morning in our little fishing village – and we have no connection with the strikers – over 11 miles away – there was a rumour that a man and a little girl had been killed by the Welsh strike-breakers – and things were said not pleasant for a Liberal to hear .30

Acland's private correspondence also gives particular prominence to the impact of the Asquith-Lloyd George split of December 1916. Just at the very moment when a more confident Labour movement was emerging in Cornwall, the Liberals were distracted by events at Westminster. A few months after the formation of Lloyd George's wartime coalition Acland was already warning of the rise of socialism and the demise of his own party. In May 1917 he remarked that Camborne was 'going Labour as fast as it can' and a month later expressed doubts that there was even 'going to be a Tory and Liberal party anymore' .³¹ With Lloyd George, the former champion of radical Liberalism, now in alliance with the Conservatives, such views were to be expected. Moreover, Acland was frustrated by the failure of Asquith to mount a real challenge to the government. Writing towards the end of 1917 he claimed that the former Prime Minister was 'too much of a gentleman to hit hard'. The party was also failing to develop a post-war reconstruction programme and he was critical of the 'ex-Cabinet ministers [who] might have done more than they have done in working out policies on social questions'. Acland concluded that 'I really think the Liberal party is dead & that one will simply have to think of men & policies after the war – not of parties'.³² Such comments tend to support the view that it was internal divisions that created a negative mindset amongst radical Liberals. This sense of a party in a state of imminent demise is evident in the following letter written to Acland in August 1918 by C. A. Millman, the Liberal agent for Bodmin:

No one can deny that our position as a party is being gradually undermined and our power for usefulness destroyed. We look for a lead in the House of Commons and in the country but we look in vain. Meanwhile the Tories, accustomed to underhand methods, and the Labour party with a courage and purpose I admire and should much like to emulate, are preparing for the struggle which cannot long be delayed. We are daily losing supporters because we refuse to formulate a well-conceived programme. Never in our political history has a great political party been content to allow judgement to go against it by default.³³

Within a year such views were to lead Millman to defect to Labour. His personal transition from radicalism to socialism was symbolic of similar decisions being taken by many other erstwhile Liberals. Yet it also suggests

that the rise of Labour was far from an inevitable process. What was crucial was the existence of an independent Labour party at this time that could offer an alternative home for those radicals who were disillusioned by the actions of Lloyd George and the inactivity of Asquith. In May 1919 Charles Trevelyan, a former junior minister in Asquith's government, remarked to Eleanor, the wife of Francis, that parties were 'only methods of combining for political purposes'. He justified his defection to Labour on the grounds that it offered an alternative vehicle for progressive politics. Since the Liberals had now lost their reputation for moral and intellectual leadership, it was time for Radicals to look elsewhere. He added that he did not 'expect much from the Labour party except that it will manage to evolve the organisation which will pretty soon get hold of the government, probably to make a horrid mess of it'. What was important was that it offered 'a new conscience and policy' that contrasted markedly with the timidity of the Asquithian leadership.³⁴ In that sense his views echoed Acland's belief that the post-war order would be based on 'men & policies' rather than parties.

With hindsight it can be said that realignment actually resulted in rigid electoral polarization based on powerful party machines, rather than loose and competing programmes reflecting principles and ideas. Yet a consideration of developments in Cornwall indicates that we should avoid assumptions of inevitability in relation to the process of realignment. For example, it was mentioned earlier that the career of Isaac Foot, the founder of a political dynasty that was to include a future leader of the Labour Party, is synonymous with the survival of Cornish Liberalism. In early 1918 this seemed a remote possibility since Foot wanted to retire prematurely from active politics in order to devote more time to a young family and growing business commitments. A plan was arranged for Acland to withdraw from Camborne in order to contest Bodmin, and it was only shortly before the 1918 election, probably due to Acland's decision that the honourable course of action was to defend his own seat, that Foot agreed to fight Bodmin.³⁵ It is worth speculating on the long-term implications. The Foot tradition was to become central to the cultural memory of Cornish Liberalism following his by-election victory at Bodmin in 1922. This symbolic event, which sustained the party's traditions at the very moment when the Liberals were under threat at the micro level, was vital in paving the way for subsequent regional victories in 1923 and 1929.³⁶ One might add that the strength of Cornish Liberalism down to the present day can be traced back to the inspirational stimulus of the Foot era. Yet in reality this particular course of events was far from inevitable in the closing months of the war.

Just as likely at the time, perhaps, was Acland's own vision of a new progressive force. He believed that an opportunity now existed for 'an entirely new division of parties' that could bring about a revival in progressive

politics based on an equal partnership between Labour and the independent Liberals.³⁷ Rather than the demise of organized Liberalism he envisaged a natural extension of the pre-war Lib-Lab pact, which had been responsible for the early expansion of Labour as a parliamentary force. Cornwall was to be in the forefront of collaboration with Acland's move to Bodmin paving the way for a regional pact in which Labour would be offered the opportunity for a straight fight against the Conservatives in Camborne and possibly another Cornish seat. In return the Liberals would be able to make their 'position absolutely safe and sure with regard to the remaining three seats'.³⁸ The proposal demonstrated the decline of morale amongst the Liberals since their historic victory in all seven Cornish constituencies in 1906. It also led to a serious bid by Acland to transform the cause of progressive politics throughout Britain. Following Asquith's defeat in 1918 he was to present himself as the 'Radical' contender for the chairmanship of the parliamentary party with the aim of forming a close alliance with Labour. It could be argued that the failure of his challenge had serious implications for the subsequent development of British politics as a whole. Yet the significance for Cornwall is that it challenges assumptions that the survival of Liberalism was inevitable just in the same way that it has been suggested that change was guaranteed elsewhere. In reality the period immediately before and after the end of the First World War was characterised by fluidity rather than political continuity.

The Cornish Question

The subject of political realignment should not be restricted to the established debate surrounding the rise of Labour. By the 1920s there were indications that British politics was moving in a variety of directions, ranging from a strengthening of the rural-urban divide to the emergence of territorial parties in the 'Celtic fringe'. Taking rural politics momentarily as an example, it could be argued that the ability of the Liberals to make significant gains from the Conservatives in agricultural constituencies in the early 1920s demonstrated that the potential for realignment went further than just the core process of Labour replacing the Liberals. By establishing a secure bloc of rural seats, some Liberal strategists concluded that their party would then be in a credible position to present itself as the real alternative to Labour.³⁹ Even in the early 1930s Acland believed that the key to a Liberal revival was the party's ability to 'wrest control of the countryside from the Conservatives'.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is no coincidence that the survival of Cornish Liberalism after the Second World War was more evident in rural Bodmin and North Cornwall, rather than in the industrial areas further west. However, the main purpose of

this particular section is to focus on the growing impact of territorial politics in Acland's Cornwall. It will examine the fusion of Celtic rhetoric and anti-metropolitanism in the region's political culture, with a view to developing a wider picture of the Cornish Celtic Revival. The implications of this process for Cornwall's subsequent political alignment are then considered.

Before returning to Acland it is necessary to briefly review the historiography of the Revival. It was noted earlier that the emergence of the Celto-Cornish movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been seen as an essentially cultural phenomenon. Bernard Deacon in the 1980s remarked that 'The Cornish Revivalists, more than their Celtic colleagues, positively wallowed in the un-reason of Romanticism'.⁴¹ Its central concern was with the restoration of the Cornish language along with the creation of new cultural institutions such as Gorseth Kernow (the Cornish Gorsedd) in 1928. Payton points out that there 'were, predictably, no corresponding political or economic aims'.⁴² Leading figures like the Rev. W. S. Lach Szymra and Turstan Peter were unable to embrace the cause of Cornish Home Rule due to their personal support of the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties. In any case, the Revivalists themselves admitted that their activities had 'scarcely touched the lives of the common people in Cornwall'.⁴³ Amy Hale, writing in 1997, asserted that in the early 1900s 'Celtic status was not then a burning issue in Cornwall itself'. Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak's campaign to persuade the pan-Celtic Celtic Association to recognise the Duchy as a Celtic nation was hardly popular since 'the press was at best ambivalent ... and the issue drew virtually no response from the public'.⁴⁴ The general consensus, then, is that the early Cornish Revivalists were an apolitical and marginal force that was unable to engage with wider trends in society at the very moment when their counterparts in Scotland and Wales were laying the foundations of separate nationalist parties.

But when it comes to the politics of Cornish identity, there is a need to reassess the wider influence of the Revival. A useful starting point is Acland's own election campaign at Camborne in December 1910, which provides some revealing insights into the way in which a popular sense of 'Celticity' was already starting to make an impact on political debate. For example, when Acland declared his support for Irish Home Rule at his adoption meeting he added that this move could then be followed by devolution for Scotland, Wales, England and Cornwall.⁴⁵ Local newspapers referred to the Celtic character of the Cornish electorate with the *Cornubian* comparing Acland to other 'great Parliamentary speakers [that] have come into Cornwall to find that their eloquence is foreign to the locality, for Cornishmen have a Celtic love of fervid speech'.⁴⁶ An 'outsider' whose debating skills did prove popular with Cornish voters was George Hay Morgan, Liberal MP for the adjacent constituency of Truro from 1906 to 1918. Truro had been a Unionist

seat since 1886 but Morgan, a Baptist preacher and a former member of the Welsh nationalist movement *Cymru Fydd*, went out of his way to attract the Methodist vote by preaching in the principal chapels in his constituency. Even in December 1910 when the Unionist champion was Charles Williams, the son of a popular local landlord, the Liberals were able to retain the seat. Significantly, Morgan justified his right to represent a Cornish seat on the grounds that he was a fellow Celt. In an election speech he expressed his admiration for ‘Mr Williams because he was a Cornishman, a Celt, and he (Mr Morgan) was that. They all belonged to the same stock, of the same blood and line but the ancestors of one went to Mid Wales and of the other to West Wales ... They were all Welshmen’.⁴⁷

Experienced politicians like Morgan were unlikely to make such statements if a general sense of Cornwall’s Celtic identity was not understood in relation to the popular culture of the time. A possible catalyst for this emerging Celtic discourse during the years leading up to the First World War was Cornwall’s eventual acceptance as a ‘Celtic nation’ at the 1904 Celtic Congress. Despite the ambivalence of some local newspapers, the fact that the campaign was reported at all was significant since it appears to have encouraged a greater public use of the word ‘Celtic’ in relation to Cornwall’s political and religious culture in subsequent years.⁴⁸ References to Cornwall’s ‘Celtic passion for liberty’ or the ‘Celtic fervour’ of Cornish Methodism could in any case be understood through a popular understanding of the region’s past. It is recognized today that ‘much earlier in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Cornish intelligentsia had already constructed its own ethnic history’ through the writings of individuals like William Borlase and Samuel Drew.⁴⁹ Moreover, political activists in the Liberal Party, in contrast perhaps to the Celtic Revivalists themselves, were able to make an instinctive connection between cultural and nationalist politics. A good example was Alfred Browning Lyne, editor of the *Cornish Guardian* and a future chairman of Bodmin Liberal Association. In 1912 he expressed his support for Cornish Home Rule after making the logical assumption that the antiquarian agenda of Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak would inevitably lead to calls for regional autonomy:

There is another Home Rule movement on the horizon. Self-government for Cornwall will be the next move. There has been a remarkable revival in the pan-Celtic movement, particularly in Brittany. ‘Bretons will not be satisfied’, we read, ‘until they have reinstated their native land as a federal state under the French flag, but with as much independence as the ... German States. They want Home Rule’. In these seditious ideas, Cornishmen appear to be sharing ... It is true that the programme sketched out for the [Cornish] Association at present is simply ‘the

study and discussion of Celtic relics, literary, artistic, and legendary'. But who can doubt that it means 'separation'? 50

Lyne's interpretation of the Revival also reflects the importance of pan-Celtic issues in pre-war British politics. The campaign for Irish Home Rule was increasingly linked to a wider agenda that included the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in nonconformist Wales and the creation of a federal system of government for the British Isles. For the Cornish Liberals the Duchy's official recognition in 1904 as a Celtic nation had been timely. The opposition was campaigning on a pro-English and anti-Celtic platform that criticized Asquith's government for neglecting the national interest in favour, as Acland's Unionist opponent in Camborne put it, of 'Ireland for the Irish, Scotland for the Scottish, Wales for the Welsh and England for the foreigner'.⁵¹ By presenting their policies in a pan-Celtic context the Liberals attempted to deflect these attacks by appealing to Cornish patriotism. A space for nationalist politics was created in the process, with a 'Cornish question' now starting to be posed alongside the more established 'Irish question'. In terms of practical policies there is evidence that an anti-metropolitan agenda was starting to emerge at this time based on policies ranging from Acland's own concern for the local issue of leasehold enfranchisement to calls for greater financial assistance from the state to support the Duchy's farming and fishing interests.⁵²

It was the issue of Anglican disestablishment that raised the prospect of some form of separate constitutional accommodation for Cornwall. The Cornish Celtic Revival has been portrayed as a 'quest to rebuild a pre-industrial Celtic-Catholic culture in Cornwall' that was unable to 'address [its] aspirations to the Methodist majority'.⁵³ It was certainly the case that key figures in the early days of the Revival like Jenner, Louis Duncombe Jewell and Lach Szyrma were either High Anglicans or Roman Catholics. But this did not mean that the nonconformists were unreceptive to the cultural discourse of the Celtic Revival. Even Jenner remarked in 1904 that 'a very large proportion' of the support for his Cornish language work came from 'the classes of hard-working clerks, small business men, shopkeepers, and artisans, the classes that form the backbone of Cornish Methodism – a very different sort of people from the same classes in a non-Celtic country'.⁵⁴ Comparisons were also made with the nationalist campaign for Anglican disestablishment in nonconformist Wales. Advocates on both sides of the debate acknowledged that Cornwall's Celtic identity could be used to justify its independence from the jurisdiction of the established Church of England.⁵⁵ A revealing insight can be seen in the comments of Mr T. J. Bennetto, the headmaster of Mevagissey Council School, who gave a talk on Cornwall's Celtic identity to the congregation of Mount Charles United Methodist Chapel in March 1912.

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Bennetto concluded that Cornwall's ability to maintain 'its independence for so long differentiated [it] from every county in England. With regard to the Christian religion it could be said of Cornwall, as Mr Lloyd George had said of Wales, that the Established religion was an imposition'.⁵⁶ Once again there is a need to look beyond the beliefs and activities of Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak in order to understand the full impact of the Revival on Liberal-Nonconformist Cornwall.

However, the failure of the Liberals to support the Cornish anti-redistribution campaign during the First World War highlights the limitations to that party's ability to act as a surrogate nationalist movement. In 1917 there was widespread opposition across the political spectrum to the recommendations of the boundary commission for a reduction in Cornwall's parliamentary representation from seven to five seats. A petition was organised by local councils, trade unionists and political activists in favour of a compromise measure of six seats that would allow for the historical link to continue between parliamentary divisions and local industries.⁵⁷ The latter concern was of particular importance to St Austell, with its china clay interests, and Camborne, which was popularly known as the 'Mining Division'. Interestingly, it was Acland who emerged as the principal opponent of the campaign. Although the Liberals had been the 'pioneers of the six-seat scheme', the member for Camborne undermined the chances of an all-party alliance by publicly declaring that the 'Liberals were honourably bound not to try to disturb the redistribution proposals'.⁵⁸ With Cornwall's other Liberal MPs generally loyal to the new Lloyd George Coalition the anti-redistributionists required Acland's support to mount an effective challenge. In the event Cornwall's representation was reduced to just five seats as a result of the changes implemented by the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

What was significant about the campaign was the way in which it appealed to regionalist sentiment. The official petition document called on central government 'to grant them a one and undivided Cornwall which will satisfy all local interests, aspirations and feelings'.⁵⁹ This concern for the region's territorial integrity was to become the cultural pivot, as Deacon suggests, for ethnic mobilization in Cornwall in the second half of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Moreover, the anti-redistributionists consciously adopted the model advocated in connection to the 'Irish Question' in order to justify separate accommodation for Cornwall. Gladstone in 1885 had defended the principle of greater representation for Ireland on the grounds that the more remote parts of the United Kingdom required special treatment since they were so far from London. The anti-redistributionists now argued that this precedent should be applied to Cornwall. Intriguingly, the *Cornish Post*, which supported the campaign, now promoted the views of Reginald F. Reynolds, a member of Cowethas Kelto-Kernuak in the early 1900s. Reynolds claimed

that the real problem for the Revivalists was that they had been 'struggling to find expressions of their views' until the emergence of the threat to Cornwall's parliamentary representation. He added that 'Home Rule reigns in the heart of the Cornish' and saw the anti-redistribution campaign as a unique opportunity to 'put the Cornish case' to Westminster.⁶¹ Acland was forced on the defensive by newspaper criticism of his stance. He claimed that extra seats for Cornwall could not come at the expense of those urban areas that had 'grown enormously since the last redistribution' and denied the claim 'that this can be dealt with solely as a Cornish question' since the national interest had to take priority:

I am quite aware that I might become the most popular man in the Duchy by running a campaign that Cornwall is of such special importance that there must be no reduction of the present membership. But this is not a time for bothering about personal popularity. It's a time for facing up to facts, and the facts are that we must either accept the present proposals or work out a new system more likely to be generally approved.⁶²

These comments underline the fact that the absence of effective parliamentary support was a serious problem for the embryonic cause of Cornish nationalism. Despite occasional appeals to Celtic and regionalist sentiment on the part of the Duchy's Liberal MPs, there was no individual prepared to take on the mantle of leadership, in contrast to Ireland and Wales. This certainly applied to Acland who preferred to focus on the great issues of state. A good example of his lack of interest in low politics can be seen in a letter written to his wife Eleanor in November 1917 when he revealed his true feelings on the subject of redistribution. Writing from the House of Commons he remarked that he had to remain in London 'in case we reach Cornwall in the Schedules to the Reform Bill – not that there's anything much I want to say but that if every other Cornish member says something I must'.⁶³ Although placing great emphasis in public on his duty and responsibilities in representing the interests of his constituency, he preferred to focus his energies on securing the core goals of female suffrage and proportional representation under the terms of the 1918 Act.

Acland's growing disenchantment with Cornwall was another factor. His letters to Eleanor express his frustration with the nonconformist sentiments of a community that, as he saw it, seemed to believe in the 'sinfulness of feeling happy'.⁶⁴ The impact of war appeared to strengthen the fundamentalist beliefs of the hard core of Cornish Methodism, resulting in the refusal of many nonconformist farmers to work on the Sabbath, public criticism of sexual immorality in the armed services, and a popular campaign for the

total prohibition of alcohol .⁶⁵ It was the latter concern that caused particular problems for Acland, since his moderate policy of simply controlling the liquor trade was not acceptable to his local party activists. He claimed that ‘the good citizens of St Day, Lanner & St Agnes’ were only interested in the ‘Drink question’ rather than the wider issues of foreign affairs and post-war reconstruction. ⁶⁶ Indeed, he portrayed wartime Cornwall as a parochial and insular society, with his constituents opposing the presence of ‘outsiders’ and critical of his wartime absence from Camborne. Acland’s frustration with the Cornish increasingly took on racial overtones during the war. This included patronizing comments about ‘their present state of development’ and the claim that ‘it was quite impossible to judge what they were thinking of, if anything’.⁶⁷ One might add that Acland was not alone in expressing racist remarks about the Cornish. Before the First World War Lyne wrote of his annoyance at the tendency for ‘outsiders’ to dismiss Cornwall as an uncivilised place where ‘perhaps it is thought the natives eat a missionary now and then’.⁶⁸ In the case of Acland, we have an example of an individual who could only relate to Cornwall through an appreciation of its landscape rather than any sense of affinity with its inhabitants:

After the Redruth meeting I’ve had a regular Cornish time. Utterly unable to find any sign that the people regard themselves as citizens or have any sort of duties in connection with carrying on the war ... We had a jolly time this morning at Tehidy and on the north cliffs. There was a fair sea on & hundreds of gulls resting on the rocks and flying up and filling the air whenever we looked over. They were pairing but not nesting yet, and a raven, & flocks of jackdaws flying higher than the gulls. And all the gulls screamed. It started a drizzly day but gradually cleared and a good cold wind got up and I really like it ... I slept all the afternoon and that was pleasant but that and the cliffs were the only things I’ve liked .⁶⁹

Acland’s frustration was to lead to his retirement from Camborne in 1922. Yet his preference for high politics was to be repeated by other Liberal candidates. During the 1920s Cornwall’s reputation as one of the party’s few remaining strongholds meant that it attracted the attention of national politicians in search of a safe seat. The classic example was in 1929 when three out of the five Cornish MPs had previously served as government ministers under Asquith or Lloyd George .⁷⁰ Isaac Foot’s personal popularity in Cornwall perhaps reflected the fact that he was a rare example of a Liberal MP who was able to build a political career through his personal efforts at the community level. Even his son John, who was to contest Bodmin for the Liberals after the Second World War, was to declare in 1950 that there

‘were too many MPs already who were more concerned with the welfare of their own constituencies than with the wider and more important national and international issues’.⁷¹ Paradoxically, such sentiments ran parallel to continuing attempts to portray Liberalism as the peninsula’s natural ideology, with claims in the inter-war period that ‘Cornishmen had always been Liberals’ and only Liberals could ‘understand Cornish folk’.⁷² Preliminary oral history research suggests that it was this regionalist dimension to the party’s identity in Cornwall that passed into cultural memory. A recorded group discussion in 2000 found that interviewees tended to make sense of their political memories through reference to stories about ‘local’ Liberals like Robartes and Foot. One individual even summed up political alignment before the Second World War by claiming that ‘If you wasn’t Methodist and Liberal you weren’t Cornish’.⁷³

These conflicting agendas influenced the subsequent development of electoral politics. The popular perception that the Liberals were Cornwall’s traditional party helped them to compete effectively against Labour and the Conservatives. On the other hand the party’s electoral position might well have been weakened in the long term by the perception that its MPs simply regarded Cornwall as a way of returning to Westminster. In 1935 a party activist in Camborne complained that ‘We have had Liberal members in this division whom we have never seen nor heard of after they have been elected’.⁷⁴ Acland was undoubtedly one of those individuals since he had been criticised by his own supporters for this very reason. The problem was that inter-war Cornwall was no longer a Liberal stronghold. All of the seats won by the party in three-cornered contests in this period were held by relatively slender majorities. This meant that it was essential for sitting members to address local concerns in order to retain vital votes. It was a point recognized by a series of Conservative MPs like Peter Agnew (Camborne, 1931–50) and Douglas Marshall (Bodmin, 1951–64) who gradually consolidated their party’s supremacy at the local level during the middle decades. Whilst there is an understandable tendency to focus on the myth of Liberal Cornwall, given the party’s survival as an effective force, consideration should also be given to the failure to retain its traditional strongholds in contrast, for example, to rural Wales. Part of the answer may well have been the general absence in Cornwall of Liberal candidates who could identify with their constituencies. There were also implications for nationalist politics. The emergence of a ‘Cornish Question’ in the pre-war period had suggested that the Duchy was moving in the same direction as the other Celtic nations. Yet there were no effective agencies to sustain this interest into the 1920s. In the same decade that nationalist parties were formed in Scotland and Wales the Cornish Revivalists could only attempt to attract public opinion by creating cultural institutions. The Cornish Liberals, now lacking the external stimulus of

pan-Celtic causes like Welsh disestablishment, and with a parliamentary leadership looking to Westminster, were unable to fill the void by building on pre-war developments and reinventing themselves as a consistent anti-metropolitan force.

Conclusion

Acland represented Camborne at a critical period in Cornwall's political history. The early appeal of Labour, combined with the impact of the Cornish Celtic Revival on popular culture, appeared to be leading to a realignment of Cornish politics in line with developments elsewhere in Britain. By the early 1920s, however, there was to be a return to the old order. To some extent social and economic conditions in Cornwall were not really conducive to political change. The lack of a trade union tradition, following the decline of mining in the previous century, along with the strength of small family businesses in sectors like agriculture, certainly presented obstacles to Labour. A similar weakness could be seen in regard to the antiquarian nature of the Celtic movement in Cornwall. Yet this study suggests that we should recognize the part that individuals and events can play at a time of transition. Acland's failure to lead the anti-redistribution campaign in 1917 came at a time when the 'Cornish question' had been placed firmly on the political agenda. It could also be argued that his decision to fight Camborne rather than Bodmin in 1918 indirectly led to Foot emerging as the champion of traditional radical nonconformity in the early 1920s. By examining the actions and beliefs of a forgotten Liberal we can, therefore, gain greater insight into the history of twentieth-century Cornish politics as a whole.

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